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Matter of Fact

By Joseph Alsop

The General Discredited

THE LATEST and most impressive Soviet rocket-launching is only one more proof that national defense ought to be the over-riding issue in the new Congressional session. For once in a way, moreover, what ought to happen in the theory may almost happen in fact.

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All of the ablest and best informed leaders of Congress, reading from Sen. Styles Bridges on the right to Sen. Hubert Humphrey on the left, have returned to Washington in a mood of active, vocal, almost angry disquiet about national defense problems. There is hardly a trace, any longer, of the old willingness to "leave defense to Ike." Except for one or two old faithfuls like Sen. Leverett Saltonstall, the more influential law-makers all more or less deeply distrust the President's budget-minded defense planning.

There are two quite practical reasons for this novel distrust. First, the Congressional chieftains are far more aware than the general public of the enormous fraud, practiced in the post-Sputnik period. They know, in fact, that the pretended increase of the American defense effort after the sputniks was really nothing but an increase of defense publicity.

IN THE FOG of press releases, even the most knowing men on the Hill took some time to perceive that the sputniks' challenge was not being answered with any great effort or investment that had not been previously programmed. But they have perceived it now, as they could hardly fail to do. Thus days after the Soviet moon probe, the President himself blandly told the White House meeting of Congressional leaders that his 1960 defense budget would actually be somewhat less than his 1959 budget.

The figures are $40,850,000,000 of requested appropriations, against $41,140,000,000 last time. These are staggering figures. The Congressional chieftains might worry less about the neglect of the sputniks' challenge, if they were not increasingly aware of the detailed defense facts.

A year ago, for instance, few people in Washington would have paid much attention to Brig. Gen. Thomas Phillips' article on "The Growing Missile Gap" in The Reporter, or to Albert Wohlstetter's article on "The Delicate Balance of Terror" in Foreign Affairs. Now a great many people are asking questions about these articles, and so they should.

Gen. Phillips, one of the best defense experts in the business, paints the darkest picture of the missile gap that has been traced by any informed brush. Some of Phillips' facts are questioned at the Pentagon, quite probably as a result of the corruptions of complacency in our current intelligence analysis. But as Chief of the War Projects Division of the semi-"official" Rand Corp., Wohlstetter belongs, in effect, to an annex of the Air Force planning staff. Not even Pentagon press office operation Wohlstetter's knowledge of the defense facts.

AFTER denouncing this as [illegible] gloom-prone report as an unwarranted optimist, Wohlstetter, the Government-employed expert, bluntly remarks that "we must expect a vast increase in the weight of attack which the Soviets can deliver with little (or no) warning." Therefore, he says, "strategic deterrence, while feasible, will be extremely difficult to achieve." He concludes, in effect, that the United States "may not have the power to deter attack" at "critical junctures in the 1960s," if we go on as we are going.

This plain warning of a possible failure of the American strategic deterrent is plainly confirmed by signs in the Pentagon, such as the rising talk about "minimum deterrence." Minimum deterrence means nothing more nor less than a strategy of killing the Soviet Union with a few big, dirty H-bombs, thrown in the death rattle after this country and almost all its striking forces have been killed already. Behind the theory of minimum deterrence, there is nothing more nor less than flabby, helpless acceptance of the gravest sort of inferiority to the Soviets in strategic striking power.

Wohlstetter's warning is also confirmed by the Kremlin's threat to Berlin, which can only be countered by complete readiness to fight a big war. Nikita Krushchev would hardly be making this kind of threat if he did not think the military balance was sharply tilting in his favor, and if he did not expect the West's answer to be influenced by the tilt in the military balance.

In this one hopes, Khrushchev has miscalculated. Thus far, the Western response to the threat to Berlin seems likely to be completely firm. The crisis arising from this threat is also likely to give just the needed extra push to the existing Congressional impulse to do something about national defense before it is too late.

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